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AUTHOR Edington, Everett D.
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ABSTRACT

Change in rural schools is difficult to achieve because the diversity of these schools does not allow for one set implementation program. Small rural schools are an integral part of the rural community, and as such are as different as the part of the country where they are located. Change in rural areas is unsuccessful due to: the amount of bureaucratic red tape involved in programs; lack of community involvement in each stage of implementation; community resistance to change from current programs; attempts to implement one set program in all rural schools; lack of acceptance of change agents in the rural community; and little local consensus about the importance of the problem defined at the national level. Implementation of programs compatible to existing programs have a higher success rate than noncompatible programs, but when outside funding is withdrawn innovative programs generally disappear. Programs must offer a variety of methods and techniques within a broad conceptual framework that allows local decision makers to determine which educational needs have priority in their communities and how these needs can best be addressed. Grassroots programs have a better chance of success than national programs introduced by "outside" agencies. (AH)

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THE FACTORS AFFECTING THE ADOPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF INNOVATIONS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

Presentation given to the National Diffusion Network Meeting, Washington, D.C.

June 15, 1982

Dr. Everett D. Edington

Las Cruces, New Mexico

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I appreciate the opportunity of being on the National Diffusion Network Program discussing the problems of change in rural schools. I believe this is the second or third year that there has been a session dedicated to education in rural America on this program. It is heartening to see this interest and I hope that it continues. Within the past two years there has also been a committee appointed by the National Diffusion Network to look at change strategies in rural schools and ways that the National Diffusion Network could better serve education in rural America. This committee is under the able leadership of the TAB organization. With the dissolvement of TAB in its present form, it is hoped that such a thrust in rural education within the National Diffusion Network will continue.

One of the problems with talking about change strategies in rural schools is the fact that rural education itself is so diversified. The people in the deep South have extremely different problems from the Indians in Alaska or the wheat farmers in Kansas or the coal miners in Appalachia. There has been a tendency in the past to try to classify rural America into one set of characteristics, describe the inhabitants and then develop programs that meet the needs of everyone. This inherent difference has been one of the major causes of failure of change programs to work in rural schools. Another problem we have is that many urban and suburban educators and others express that education is education wherever it may be found. I have heard this expressed by many people in the National Diffusion Network, that no matter where a program is developed

it could quite easily be adapted to any type of community. By far the major part of the National Diffusion Network programs are developed in medium sized to urban areas and they do not always work when transported to rural schools. It is extremely important for personnel in the National Diffusion Network, both Facilitators and Developer Demonstrators, to recognize that differences do exist and not only must programs be adapted but also the methods of communicating the implementation of these programs must be adapted to meet the needs of the schools in the rural areas. In looking at the great diversity of rural America, however, there are two characteristics which are generally true of most rural schools. Usually they are smaller than other schools, thus have fewer pupils, fewer teachers and staff and there are degrees of isolation in the rural communities. Nachtigal (1980) came up with a simplified way of classifying rural American communities. He divided these into the rural poor, the traditional middle America and the communities that were in transition. While there is a real danger in such a simplified classification, it does aid the researcher and the educator to realize that there are differences in schools in the rural areas. Nachtigal himself admits there are obvious dangers in trying to force reality into such a simplistic taxonomy and that in the real world there are far too many variables and far too complex. However, his taxonomy is a step in the right direction in the classification of schools in rural America.

One of the most serious problems that outside change agencies fail to recognize in working with small rural schools is the importance that the school has within the regular community and that outside agencies cannot determine what the problems are, develop the programs, operate them, maintain and evaluate them and be successful. Many have tried a facade of utilizing the citizens

within the community and the teachers and administrators within the school. This facade has not worked. It must be a real cooperative effort in order for it to be successful in working with the schools. Richard Peters (1975) in talking about the "implementation change agent" suggests that he must be an individual who:

1. can readily identify all facets of a given situation and choose the most appropriate one;
2. be knowledgeable about day-to-day life and politics of small rural communities; and
3. be perceived as belonging by the community people.

He suggested that this is important at every phase of the change process.

Paul Nachtigal (1980) mentioned that in spite of the good intentions of the urban/rural project to let communities call the shots, inflexible time lines and bureaucratic expectations of what constitute an acceptable proposal forced the community to rely on a neighboring university for the program design. With the loss of local ownership, council members who originally worked without pay during the majority of other urban/rural council meetings were paying themselves $10 a meeting. Further, according to the elementary principal, the inservice education program was too much of a teacher oriented college degree program without much effect on actual classroom behavior. Deal and Nutt (1979) in their discussion of the Experimental Schools program indicated that as the Experimental Schools program's projects move from planning to implementation, conflicts begin to erupt in all the districts. Some of the conflict is to be expected since implementation is a type of action when disagreements previously concealed by the ambiguous, abstract prose of a plan become obvious as concrete actions are taken. But they went on to show that there is much more than the normal conflict due to bureaucratic problems and

red tape, therefore, adequate planning was not possible. The time for planning and implementation were done quickly at the beginning of the school year. For many districts, the opening of the school and the inauguration of the Experimental Schools project were marked by considerable confusion and conflict.

Nachtigal (1980) also found that what works in one community or area of the country may not work in another. The Ford Foundation sponsored a leadership development program in 1966 to identify and help develop a new cadre of leadership in rural areas of the United States. They found this quite successful where approximately 85% of their fellows return to rural communities. However, the efforts to develop new leadership outside the socioeconomic mainstreams such as traditional Native Americans have been largely unsuccessful. This may have been due to the program activities and requirements which were sufficiently foreign to the existing life styles as to make this type of intervention experience of questionable value. The Ford Foundation program was quite expensive, however, and the spinoff called the Southern Appalachian Leadership Training which was also funded by the Ford Foundation which had less travel and more flexibility in the funding links of fellowship, has been much more useful in developing leadership in Appalachia at a much lower cost.

A very interesting grass roots program that involved people in the communities is the People United for Rural Education (PURE) which is primarily in the state of Iowa. In 1977 the Iowa state legislature proposed legislation mandating the consolidation of school districts with enrollments of fewer 300 students. PURE was organized primarily to combat this legislation. PURE is composed of local lay leaders, some educators, but is run primarily by

the lay people from the rural communities in Iowa. After they were successful in combating consolidation, they have turned their efforts to other ways of providing more quality education to rural youth in Iowa and because of this emphasis from the people themselves, it has been quite successful in upgrading many of the school programs there.

The organization of the school itself sometimes may be either a help or a hinderance to bringing about change. Rural schools have a much less complex adminstrative and organizational structure, which many times makes it easier to implement change. At the same time personnel there wear many different hats and are not able to concentrate their time upon one issue and thus insure change to be properly implemented. The Superintendent many times may be the Principal, the director of transportation, director of curriculum, even a bus driver, as well as teaching a class. With such a variety of responsibilities, even though there are few people, sometimes it is very difficult for the change to be properly implemented into the small rural system.

Deal and Nutt (1979) pointed out that the characteristics of the change itself may make it very difficult to implement within the rural areas. They found out in a rural experimental schools program that those changes which were added to the regular program, as long as money was provided to aid them, seemed to be accepted. However, if they were replacing something else, and the old program had a number of backers, it was very difficult to implement the change. They also found out in the experimental schools program that once the outside money is gone, most of those innovative programs disappeared. They also reported that those districts that implemented programs that were compatible with what they were already doing, there was very little conflict, where those that were not compatible, as might be expected, caused extreme conflict both within the schools and within the communities.

It is interesting to note some of the consequences of the major change programs in rural America. As I mentioned earlier, most of the rural experimental schools projects fell short of the expectations. In the Oregon program, a backlash of conservative forces has arisen. Many of the experimental schools programs had been discontinued. Library books and curriculum materials are now scrutinized by watchdog committees. A new board has been elected, the Superintendent and Associate Superintendent have left and the new administration has a mandate to get things back to normal. While some of the conservative trends result from the times, there are many holding the view that the swing in the Oregon experimental school program was because of the experimental schools and was not necessarily a trend of the times. (Deal & Nutt, 1979). The Rural Futures Development program sponsored by the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory in their work in San Juan, Utah, was implemented where there was a white/Indian school battle going on. Much of the population in the southern part of the county were the Native Americans and most of the others were Anglo. About 50% school population was represented from each group. They had a difficult time keeping and funding neutral facilitators. It was quite natural for the Indian process facilitator to take an advocacy position on the side of the Indian community. Nachtigal (1980) reported that now that the outside money is no longer for such positions, the number of process facilitators have been reduced to one who tends to identify more the needs of the schools and central administration than those of the community.

Nachtigal (1980) did report that some programs come much closer to meeting the criteria of durability and usefulness. The New School, now the Center for Teaching and Learning, the University of North Dakota, is preparing teachers

12 years after the program was begun. The PURE program which is locally funded did not have to pass the test of surviving the elimination of outside funding and thus it has continued and expanded its purpose. The Leadership Development Program which was modified to much more meet the needs of the local people has continued. He also pointed out that the ultimate test for the National Diffusion Network has not been met because it still receives federal funding. Nachtigal did point out that the NDN seemed to be one of the change programs with the best record in rural communities. He states: "The National Diffusion Network stands as an example of federal strategy that works well in the rural state, although it was not designed particularly for rural areas. However, it will more generally be found that federal strategies such as experimental schools, teacher corps, and urban/rural led to stories of either inappropriate design or problems with federal administrative procedures in relation to the needs and dynamics of rural schools." He finally reported that heavily funded efforts were not necessarily more successful than those operating on small local budgets. In fact, there seem to be more dangers in overfunding a small school program in terms of its durability. Many more feel that in rural communities, projects fail in part because there is little local consensus about the importance of the problem defined at the national level. Consequently, commitment to the project goals was not forthcoming. Nachtigal further reported, "This does not mean that federal policy makers or other outside planners must abandon their own goals and objectives and simply put money on the stump to effect change in rural school practices. What it does mean is that programs must offer variety of methods and techniques within a broad conceptional framework that allows local decision makers to determine which educational needs have greatest priority in their communities and how these needs can best be addressed." (p. 29). In essence Nachtigal's recommendations follow very closely the philosophy of the National Diffusion Network.

In conclusion, there are a few points I would like to bring out as far as changing rural schools. First is the importance of involvement at all levels of people within the schools and within the communities. This cannot be a facade but must be real involvement for the head decision making. The second is distance. Distance, also coupled with the structure of the school, makes it important that the change agents bring the programs to the schools in their vicinities. You can't sit in the Albuquerques and Oklahoma Citys and expect the small rural people to come to you for the assistance they need. You have to go to the Guymans and you've got to go to the Weeds. Third, is the structure of the school itself which is much simpler. Generally, this enhances adoption. Also, the people involved have many jobs and this may slow down implementation of adoption. Fourth is the locally initiated and financed programs have been much more successful in the small rural school than those which are initiated from outside with large amounts of financing Fifth, rural participants are likely to have greater and more frequent need for technical assistance than their urban counterparts.

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